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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 SAN SALVADOR 000588

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DUBAI FOR IRAN RPO, DEPARTMENT FOR ISN, IO, AND NEA

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SUBJECT: INTERVIEW WITH IRANIAN AMBASSADOR TO MEXICO AND NICARAGUA

REF: A. STATE 19372
1B. STATE 23001

Classified By: Ambassador Charles L. Glazer for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: On March 11, leading El Salvador daily La Prensa Grafica published an interview in its Sunday magazine with Mohammed Roohi Sefat, Iranian Ambassador to Mexico (also accredited to Nicaragua), about his opinions of the Salvadoran Armed Forces presence in Iraq.

The interview was held in Mexico City, and while focusing much attention on El Salvador, it may also give clues about Iran's intentions in the rest of the region. The article is also interesting in the context that the GOES has recently shared its concerns about expanding Iranian influence in Central America via its relations with the new government in Managua. GOES officials say they feel particularly vulnerable to the dangers of this expanding Iranian influence because of the presence of the Cuscatlan Battalion in Al Kut, near the Iran-Iraq border. Moreover, the GOES has shared information with post concerning the travel of Salvadoran Shiites to Iran, via Caracas, to receive training. Ambassador Sefat was highly critical of El Salvador's foreign policy, and also claimed that Iran is not aligning itself with leftist governments in Latin America, but rather countries that seek to be "independent." END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

12. (U) The following is an unofficial translation of the article done by post:

"EL SALVADOR CAN'T HAVE ANY REAL INTEREST IN IRAQ"

Q.This has been a beneficial year for Iran in Latin America: Visits to Nicaragua, Venezuela, Ecuador. A great year really?

1A. It has been a very beneficial year, but more than anything the world keeps getting smaller. It is very normal that the authorities of countries travel to many parts of the world, for the diversification of international relations. We have not come to Latin America only to make our country known, but we have also invited the Latin America officials to come and visit us. Right now in fact, there are two seminars about Latin America being given in Teheran, one about economics and another about cultural and political relations.

Q. Iran recently established a relationship with Daniel Ortega, who says he shares with you the year of your "independence."

A. That is correct, the Iranian revolution took place the same year of the victory of the Sandinistas, but before that, even before Ortega took the power, we have had bilateral relations with Nicaragua. I have traveled many times to Nicaragua, since I am the accredited Ambassador. But when the Commander Daniel Ortega won, he invited our president to the swearing in ceremony. Mr. Calderon also invited our president, as well as the President of Ecuador.

Q. The only difference is that the Iranian President did not go to Calderon's ceremony.

A. It's because the situation (after Calderon's victory) was not very stable, that is why the visit did not take place, but in the other countries, it did.

Q. The Iranian President, during his visit to Nicaragua, declared that Nicaragua and Iran were joined by a "common enemy." If that was referring to the United States, do Iran and the rest of the leftist governments in Latin America, who are against Washington, have possibilities of forming increasingly close relations?

A. Regarding the common enemy, you may ask Mr. Ahmadinejad and Mr. Ortega about it. I was present in that meeting (in Nicaragua) and the two presidents talked about economic issues, and above all, about the well-being of the two countries. We do not consider the United States to be our enemy, but we do have a lot of differences in several aspects.

Q. Compared with your president, you are very diplomatic.

A. Ha, ha, ha. We're looking for the development and the expansion of the relations, not to destroy them.

Q. When President Ahmadinejad makes a tour in Latin America, he visits Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Cuba, and he sees President Evo Morales. There are a few doubts that the allies of Iran are the leftist governments.

A. Currently, the ideology is not really considered in the region. I think it is better to call them the independentist countries, rather than leftists. You may consider all those countries to be leftist, but how would you define the government of Lula, or Argentina, Chile? All of them apparently are leftist governments, but what they really seek is their independence. We, as we have the same ideas of not accepting the force, have something in common with those countries.

Q. You say that they are countries that seek their independence. What country in Latin America, according to you, does not seek its independence.

A. Naturally, they all seek their independence, but this depends on what type of relationship they establish with the great powers. Before, the governments of the region arrived at decisions dictated by the great powers, but now all arrive in power via popular elections. For us this is very respectable. In other aspects, from a commercial point of view, we consider Latin America to be a big market, and we want to have something to do with this market. President Ahmadinejad had to pass a good deal of time to be able to achieve stability in his environment, and now that he has achieved it, he's decided to travel, now that there is so much noise being made about our country in other parts of the world. The travel of our president is within this framework, that is to find relations with other countries.

Q. I want to describe some aspects of El Salvador: It is the only country in Latin America that has troops in Iraq, with a government that has criticized some postures of President Ahmadinejad and that with near certainty will vote

against the enrichment of uranium in Iran at the UN. Could your government establish relations with El Salvador under these terms?

¶A. We would like that those governing El Salvador have a realistic perception about Iran. You yourself note that El Salvador would vote against Iran in any resolution that has to do with uranium enrichment. This shows that the content of the resolution is not important to El Salvador, that if it has anything to do with Iran, El Salvador votes against us, and we consider that an unrealistic perception. If El Salvador wants to see things as they actually are, it should know that with respect to our nuclear program, everything is based upon our membership with the IAEA. Everything we are doing is within the terms of Article 4 of the Protocol of the IAEA. This article mentions that the countries who are members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty can perform uranium enrichment activities. Moreover, we allow international inspectors to come and we leave them free to do what they want. I think that the authorities of El Salvador should reconsider their decision about Iran. But our problem is a lot bigger than what El Salvador might think about these international topics. I am making a considerate invitation for the authorities of El Salvador to travel to Iran, so that they can see the type of people we have, so that they might change their opinions.

¶Q. Do you think El Salvador acts like it does because it hates Iran, or because it follows the United States?

¶A. My answer is in your questions, it's very obvious.

¶Q. So are the leftist governments the natural allies of Iran in Latin America?

¶A. One could think that it's like that. It's just that I don't view them in terms of "leftist." My question is, what interest does El Salvador have sending troops to Iraq, against UN resolutions? Let's suppose that later another government is formed in Iraq. What will El Salvador gain? A better way of putting it is that I think the Government of El Salvador must respond to its people and explain why this is in their interests. Why do all those young Salvadorans go from a small country to look for war and death in Iraq?

¶Q. Recently the Palestinian Ambassador in Mexico told the magazine "Enfoques" that the fact El Salvador has troops in Iraq causes the country to have a negative perception in the rest of the Arab World. And you all? Do you see El Salvador in this way?

¶A. Naturally.

¶Q. Does it bother Iran that Salvadoran troops are in Iraq?

¶A. I'm going to answer you with a Persian saying, and I hope that you don't take it the wrong way. On the branch of a very old and large tree, a little bird arrives to perch. When the bird is about to take off, it says to the tree, "Take care, I'm going to take off flying." The tree answers, "I didn't even realize you were there." I repeat, what role could El Salvador possibly have? What role can El Salvador have if all their arms are provided by another country that calls when it needs something but turns its back when it doesn't. This is a question the people of El Salvador must formulate: "Why are we fighting in Iraq?" We were enemies of Saddam and we had a war with him, because we have 1,200 kilometers of common border and we didn't want Saddam to be in power there, but you all are very far away from Iraq, you can't have any interests there. The Salvadorans in combat are fighting for someone else. They are in a war that was not approved of by the UN, nor by the people of the world.

¶Q. You speak of how small El Salvador is, of how little it interests Iran, but Nicaragua is almost as small and even poorer. Is Iran getting closer to Nicaragua just to have an ally in international votes? Is Iran getting closer to Nicaragua to confirm that's what the United States does to El

Salvador?

IA. Yes that's true, but that's why we say that even El Salvador could be a friend of Iran. Nicaragua is not the only Latin American country with which we have (diplomatic) relations: Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba. Currently there is much stronger coming together of viewpoints between Nicaragua and Iran, and for that reason we have a lot in common. They invited us and we responded. Here again I want to re-iterate my invitation for the Government of El Salvador to change its viewpoint. We don't want the Government of El Salvador to see things as we dictate, rather that they simply see reality as it is.

IQ. Doesn't it occur to you why El Salvador might be helping in a war started by the United States?

IA. That's my question. We know that the United States has interests there, and Great Britain as well: they share an interest in controlling the oil of the world, just as they want to control Palestine. But El Salvador? People in Iraq have never heard of El Salvador, they don't even know where it is.

IQ. Does it seem odd to you then that someone is interviewing you about El Salvador?

IA. Yes.

IQ. I repeat: it's the only Latin American country with troops in Iraq, the last to move its Embassy in Israel from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. Can Iran be friends with El Salvador?

IA. El Salvador on its own is going to one day come to the conclusion that its foreign policy is not good. The majority of countries that sent troops to Iraq currently have embassies in Tehran. I will tell you something else to clear things up: with the United States we have some aspects in common and some at odds. Our greatest enemy was Saddam, but despite the fact that Saddam attacked us, and he did so for eight years, even using chemical weapons, we weren't the ones who attacked Iraq. Such an attack was not approved by the UN, which is why we never did it. With respect to Afghanistan, we even helped the Americans quite a bit in their attack on the Taliban. That was because the UN had approved the attack. We are very happy that Saddam is no longer in power, and in this we have a common position with El Salvador and the United States. Our hope is that a government is established of Iraqis and that it is stable. Our questions is: if Saddam is already dead, and Iraq already has a government, what are foreign troops still doing there? For how long will El Salvador be in Iraq? What kind of government are they going to bring? With which groups is El Salvador in contact with in Iraq? What groups in Iraq are in favor of Salvadoran interests?

IQ. El Salvador obtained this year more than USD 400 million in cooperation assistance (referring to MCC) that up until a year ago the U.S. was only giving to low income, not lower middle income countries like El Salvador. There are many who mention the troops present in Iraq as one of the reasons.

IA. Evidently you don't think that El Salvador is fighting over in Iraq for the cause of liberty, but rather for money. This has another meaning in this war.

IQ. You were speaking about the profound respect Iran has for UN Resolutions. Nevertheless, this week the UN asked Iran for the last time that it stop its enrichment of uranium, and the President of Iran answered that even in the face of force Iran would continue its program. A contradiction?

IA. Yes its a contradiction. Nevertheless, the UN Resolution is different from the Non-Proliferation Criteria. In Article 4, the IAEA is giving us the right to continue with uranium enrichment. According to this article, we not only have a right to have a nuclear program of uranium enrichment, but also countries that have such technology are supposed to help

us. The topic of atomic energy in Iran is political, not technical. The United States in the era of the Shah were the ones that proposed to us starting an atomic energy program, and trained our personnel to do so. The justification of the United States was that one day oil was going to run out. Thirty years later, the United States tells us that we have plenty of petroleum and gas and that we don't need nuclear energy. If enriching uranium is so bad for us, why isn't it bad for everyone? The IAEA has confirmed that we have not had nuclear tests. Our neighbors are not signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but they have nuclear arms, and the United States helps them, while at the same time they criticize us and ask us not to do so. What we are trying to do is produce energy.

Q You say that El Salvador and the United States are in Iraq against the will of the UN, yet you maintain your nuclear program against the will of the UN. Is this violating what the UN orders a game that everyone plays?

I.A. That's it, that's it, you're a real diplomat. And what we want is not to involve ourselves very much in this game. We don't accept the resolution because we consider it a political game.

IQ. Even so, are you willing to engage in violence to defend your program?

I.A. What we are willing to do is engage in dialogue. We have proposed such dialogue on various occasions. There isn't any problem that doesn't have a negotiable solution, but we will not accept a precondition, or any condition laid out in advance, in order to sit down and talk.

I3. (C) COMMENT: The GOES has on various occasions expressed their concern about Iranian intentions in the region, and expressed what they feel is a vulnerability based on their deployment of the Cuscatlan Battalion. El Salvador has made efforts for more engagement in the Arab World in the past year, moving its Israeli embassy from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv and opening diplomatic relations with a number of Arab countries. Mid-level MFA contacts told poloff they found it disconcerting that an Iranian Ambassador would speak at such length about El Salvador.
Glazer